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Pay for Grades

Question: Is it a good idea to pay high school students for improved grades in classes or on standardized tests? Does it work to improve student achievement?

Summary of Findings: The practice of paying students to earn good grades either in class or on standardized achievement tests has touched off a storm of controversy. Praised by some educators as a way of linking economic rewards to school performance, it is being tested in a number of large cities, such as New York, Baltimore and Chicago, as well as some smaller communities, such as Macon, Georgia. In addition to citing numerous practical impediments, critics claim it is nothing more than a bribe that demeans both the students and the academic process. Research on the subject is sparse, and the results are mostly mixed. However, according to researchers and leaders in districts that are experimenting with the concept, there is sufficient evidence to continue to refine and extend the program judiciously. The bottom line is that, in the absence of conclusive evidence, the controversy is likely to continue for the foreseeable future.

Discussion:

Schools paying students for getting good grades? Outrageous! Or is it? For the past few years, a debate has raged over the wisdom, practicality, economics and morality of paying students to earn good grades or perform well on standardized tests. Despite the unconventionality of the approach, and the wariness of many educators and parents, the practice seems to be spreading, particularly in metropolitan communities. A recent article by Greg Toppo in *USA Today* reported that twelve states will experiment with or develop extensive pay for performance plans.

Multiplied by the number of students in a large district, the amounts being offered to students are hardly trivial. In Baltimore, high school students can earn up to \$110 for improving their scores on high school graduation exams, costing the district nearly \$1 million. In New York City, 7th and 8th graders in 60 schools can earn as much as \$500 for raising scores on the state math and English tests, and in two suburban Atlanta districts, students will be paid \$8.00 an hour to participate in a 15 week “earn and learn” program.

The arguments for these payments are generally logical and can be compelling. Advocates claim that payments for school performance is simply accelerating the process that occurs naturally – the highest performing students are

offered the most attractive post-graduation options and, as a result, the highest paying jobs. The rationale is that the school is simply shortening the time between school performance and pay-off that has always existed.

Further, advocates say, many affluent parents pay their own children for high grades. Making the option available to all children, regardless of their family's financial circumstances, is simply a matter of fairness.

Critics of the practice raise moral dimensions about the wisdom of "bribing" students for something they should do without short-term financial incentives. Bribes, they argue, remove the opportunity for students to develop internal motivations to achieve and strive for excellence. Such a practice will further erode the work ethic and pride in accomplishment that motivates many workers to do an excellent job and replace these loftier motives with much a much more basic, and temporary, financial motive. High school principals surveyed by the [Principals' Partnership](#), a program of the Union Pacific Foundation, rejected the idea of paying students for grades by an overwhelming majority.

Other critics raise logistical and practical questions as well. Will all students be rewarded for the same level of performance? If so, will students with disabilities be denied rewards even if they improve substantially when measured against their own starting point? And what will happen to school budgets as ever higher payments are required to motivate student achievement? Will districts compete for the "best" students by offering higher incentives for school performance?

The actual effects of pay for grades may be promising, but they are certainly not clear. One study from Johns Hopkins found that pay for grades had positive effects among more disadvantaged students. A study by Public Agenda, however, found that high school students rated pay as seventh, behind such motivational factors as personal satisfaction and parent approval. Anecdotal evidence is even less definitive. Most parents can tell about personal experiences with their own children in which pay for grades either worked or didn't – often within the same family, or even with the same student at different points in his or her development. As pressures on schools and students mount to increase test performance and school achievement, it is clear that pay for performance, long touted as a sound approach for motivating the adults in the school, will trickle down to students as well. For now, wise principals and teachers will stay informed about the initiative, the arguments around it, and what a growing body of research tells us about how it works with different students.

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Submitted Date: 09/15/2008 By: Howard Johnston, Department of Secondary Education, University of South Florida

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